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ABSTRACT

Since the majority of college students will enter the business community rather than pursue an academic career, communication and language instruction should reflect the demands of employers. Similarly, the needs and wants of the identified public, students and their prospective employers, should be considered in the adjustment of instructional goals and objectives. Surveys indicate that employers value courtesy most highly among spoken language traits. Written skills important to the mastery of expository prose such as the mechanics of layout, spelling, and punctuation, are also rated highly. English instructors should therefore direct their curriculum toward courses encouraging idea organization, usage, spelling, accuracy, and neatness in student composition. (KS)

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Needs and Wants--from the Public

by Ralph G. Dille

As instructors of English, we need, first, to establish who our public is and the nature of our public. Our immediate public is our students. (They may be called our "audience," at times.) They are, however, our immediate public, and we should give careful consideration to what this public wants and needs. If the students are not aware of their needs, we must go to another part of our public--a public which is somewhat removed from the classroom but which is most influential in our chosen profession. This public is the potential employers of our students, and these employers also include many of the parents of our students. Our larger public evaluates our practices and our effectiveness and, accordingly, votes on the educational funding measures or passes its evaluation of our program on to others. So, our public basically is composed of our students and their potential employers. In this presentation, I propose to relate some of the wants and needs which our public expects from language arts instruction and to suggest some methodologies by which we can become aware of and can meet our public's expectations.

For the purposes of this paper, I wish to ignore our professinal public--our peers and our professional associates. I especially wish to ignore those professionals who lament the state of our discipline, but who offer no solutions. Two articles in a recent issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education[1] lament the inadequacies

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of student use of language conventions. Both writers are instructors of freshman composition courses; they comment upon the students' inadequate vocabulary, composition skills, and ability to organize materials. Although the writing styles of these authors are clever, the authors tell us nothing new; and they offer no solutions or alternatives to the observed situation. My reaction to these writers is that, instead of attempting to entertain their professional peers, they should have spent their time in learning what their public wanted and needed. But then, perhaps their tenures or their promotions depend upon publishing "something."

Our immediate public, the students, is a selective public. According to the 1970 census reports, secondary education or less is terminal education for nearly seventy-five percent of the population of this nation.[2] (Only approximately 90% of the population reaches the ninth grade.) As instructors in instutions of higher or continuing education, we come in contact only with that twenty-five percent of our population which continues in or returns to the mainstream of education. Within this mainstream of twenty-five percent, 7.6% of the population enters some form of two-year or technical college program. The number of persons who complete these higher education programs is less than eight percent of the total national population because fewer than fifty percent of those students entering a two-year or technical college complete the course of study; in the four-year college, fewer than twenty-five percent of the initially enrolled students complete the course of study. These figures indicate that we are teaching English to a body of students who will not complete

the academic or educational lock-step sequence.

We are, then, teaching English to the majority of students--those who will leave the educational mainstream and enter the business or work world. Ultimately, nearly every student in the American educational system, excluding teachers, librarians, counselors, and administrators, will leave this system and will be a part of the business/work community. Our immediate public is a job-entry public, and our primary task is to train that public for the business/work community--to teach those language skills needed on the job. I will not argue the points favoring cultural enrichment or personal awareness in the teaching of English at this time.

Traditionally, Americans have considered education to have two major goals: "One has been the preparation of students for living; the second has been the preparation of students for making a living."[3] Educators, including guidance personnel and the faculties of liberal arts departments, have tended to emphasize the traditional academic programs supposedly preparing the students "for living," but they often have little regard for those skills, competencies, or behavioral traits which are essential to the business of making a living. Unfortunately, most curricula are designed to prepare students for the traditional college sequence[4]--not the immediate job market--preparation for making a living. The great majority of students, however, need training in communication (language) skills which will prepare them for, and will be consistent with, the requirements of the businesses which they enter. They need communication skills which are appropriate to their specific

vocational areas. For example, such courses as literature, poetry, film-making, or drama would be less helpful to a future secretary than courses in business English, letter and report writing, speech, telephone manners, and common courtesy.

Our immediate public may want an "easy" or an "interesting" course while he is enrolled in our institution. He may be justified in wanting to do as little as possible or to be entertained. If he has come to college, having been spoon-fed and allowed to remain unaware of the application of language skills to his future employment, he will expect to continue in the same vein. However, surveys regarding worker reactions to previous education have been conducted in industry, in rehabilitation, and in education. These surveys indicate that the employees place importance upon language-related job skills such as handwriting, telephone courtesies, the ability to spell adequately, the ability to punctuate effectively, and the ability to write with clarity.[5] There is further evidence that students can increase their language skills and language awareness as a spin-off from the vocational training they receive.[6] From one such survey, a former student added to the questionnaire response indicating he "would encourage programs that put more emphasis on English grammar and writing structure."[7] Another respondent added to his questionnaire that he felt that "more time should be spent on the improvement of each student's study habits, and English composition skills."[8] These former students--now employees--recognize the need for language skills; they may not have wanted

them while they were enrolled in college, but the students do acknowledge the need for language skills on the job.

Our other public--the employers--have some things to tell us, too. One way to find out what the business public has to tell us is to ask them, and perhaps the quickest and most objective method of asking them is to survey the business community in a given area to determine what communication (language) skills and competencies are needed. A study designed to identify the priorities of communication or language skills modeled after the needs of employers could indicate curriculum changes which would coincide with current employer practices, permit identification of areas of instruction which could be best accomplished by business and those areas more effectively taught in the classroom, and lead to a reduction, in many cases, of duplication of services.

Few studies of job-related language skills have been done. In fact, I know of only four such studies. I have been associated with two of these: one in western Oregon and one in western New York. I will speak primarily of a survey completed in western New York, where I teach English at a unit of the State University of New York. Before designing the survey questionnaire, several employers were asked for suggestions based upon their respective needs. Because these representatives included the term courtesy among the "essential" communication skills and because they rated courtesy as "indispensable," courtesy was included among the communication-related skills in the survey. Courtesy, as defined by the employers,

is the awareness and the sensitivity both to others and to what is being said and written. We, as teachers of English, recognize this definition as being related to language skills.

The final list of employers included representatives from government, education at all levels, manufacturers, banks, automotive dealers, hospitals, finance, social agencies, and public utilities--the employers in that geographic area.

The responses to the survey suggest that the work world of employees can be long in service and limited in size. The average business in the survey had a life of 33.9 years; the average number of full-time employees was 6.5; the average number of part-time employees was 2.8. The average employee in that area, then, has a community of peers which is fewer than seven, and he has the potential of more than thirty years with an employer.

In reference to language skills, 71.3 percent of the respondents to the survey equate speaking with writing skills. Only 18.4 percent maintain that writing skills are more important, and only 9.6 percent opted in favor of spoken language as being more important than writing skills. Hence, the need for skills in writing comes out the winner by 8.8 percentage points. That these skills are considered essential mandates that the English instructor place emphasis upon them.

In response to the importance of writing skills. 58.4 percent place emphasis upon "getting the idea across." This is reminiscent of the Winston cigarette commercial: "Do you want good grammar or good taste?" In all cases, grammar, although important, took second

place. Notice, however, that both "getting the idea across" and "grammar" (i.e. usage) are held in high regard by employers. From the 268 responses, 99 percent of the surveyed population rated spelling as a "necessary" language skill, and 28 percent rated it "the most important" writing skill. Neatness of appearance of work ranked next in importance to spelling; 95.7 percent of the target population considered neatness to be "essential." This type of response emphasizes that, as English instructors, we must be concerned with idea, organization, usage, spelling, accuracy, and neatness in student composition.

Punctuation followed spelling and neatness of appearance as ranked by the survey population. Punctuation was ranked as "necessary" to 78.9 percent of the respondents. Punctuation, of course, is also related to the top-ranked skill, "getting the idea across."

In spoken communication, "courtesy-to-others" took first place, followed by "acceptable vocabulary," "pleasantness of voice," and "correct pronunciation," in that order.

Courtesy, that awareness and sensitivity to others and to what is said both in spoken and in written communication, was considered by 100% of the respondents to be "essential" in business--a landslide. "Acceptable vocabulary" was rated "essential" by 94.4 percent; "pleasantness of voice" was "essential" to 88.4 percent; "willingness to respond" was "essential" to 98.9 percent; and "correct pronunciation" was "essential" to 71.7 percent. These responses give us some idea of how classroom discussions and conferences might be used to develop student language awareness.

Courtesy seemed to be the most constant of the spoken language traits; it was considered "essential" to all of the respondents. The other characteristics, although important to varying degrees, probably depended upon the type of business involved and the needs of that particular business. Apparently, it matters not whether the business is large or small, profit or non-profit, governmental or private, educational or industrial; everybody places the highest priority on courtesy--that awareness and sensitivity to others and to what is said.

The "most important" language skill for employees in this survey is writing. In order to get an idea across in a persuasive, logical and coherent manner, the style of writing used for letters, technical reports, and research-report writing should be taught as a part of the communications (English) curriculum. The form of writing essential for business, then, is expository writing. In addition to expository writing, the mechanics of layout, spelling, and punctuation are considered "essential."

Based upon the results of this survey, students who enter the work force need to receive a firm foundation in the writing style essential in business-expository writing. The form and the criteria of expository writing place emphasis upon those qualities favored by employers responding to this survey--getting the idea across, use of grammar, spelling, acceptable punctuation, and organization of materials and ideas. The process of expository writing emphasizes logical thinking--an asset to anyone and a requirement by a majority of employers.

The survey did not deal with personal mannerisms in business; however, all employers added something more than the questionnaire indicated. Personal mannerisms such as mumbling, gossiping, gum-chewing, tardiness, and poor personal appearance are indicated as distractions to business.[10] Training, therefore, with emphasis upon enunciation, grooming and personal awareness, and protocol in conversation should be included in the training of potential employees. In addition, students should be made aware of the various levels of language usage, separating the use of slang, colloquialism, and taboo expressions from the more-desired standard and professional forms which employers want both in written and in verbal language. Althoughwritten expression is most often indicated as a desirable skill, more than eighty percent of the respondents commented that verbal language skills, especially those related to telephone usage and to client contact, were essential.

Of prime importance is the element of courtesy. The concepts of courtesy--awareness and sensitivity--must be brought to the attention of the potential employee by bringing it into every possible situation--in the classroom and out of the classroom.

As you can see, the survey results indicate that all levels of Bloom's taxonomies--behavioral, cognitive, and affective domains--should be used in developing an English program which meets the wants and needs of our population.

All of my analysis of this survey indicates that, if you really want to discover the wants and needs of your public, ask them in a nonthreatening, nonplacating, objective manner, and they will tell you--loud and clear! As with all research, surveys take a lot

of time, but the results can do much to give positive direction to your program of instruction. Also, your public can be sure that it is being heard.

I do not propose that English or language instruction be limited only to the wants and needs which such a survey identify. Most of us realize that the need for language skills in some vocations is minimal; however, the "minimum" needs to be well-grounded. The minimum skills are the floor-the fundamentals--without which the ceiling--the cultural enrichment or personal awareness--cannot be supported. I don't prefer teaching "bonehead" English; I would much prefer to speak eloquently about the use of symbolic logic in language analysis or about the symbolism and imagery in the early writings of Harold Frederic. But, I am a teacher; that is what I am paid to be; that is what I have been trained to be; that is my profession, and my public deserves to be taught those things which it needs and wants. If that public wants and needs "bonehead" English, it gets "bonehead" English before I lead them, willy-nilly, into the "ivory tower." Because our public wants and needs basic language skills, these skills must be constantly reinforced and retained as the base for all other language skill instruction.

John F. Gummere, in a recent bulletin by The Council for Basic Education observes that language skills, properly defined, are "cold, impartial, and precise; they make no value judgments at all, any more than the chemist does when he specifies the ingredients for paint."[11] To continue Mr. Gummere's analogy, we all want to enjoy listening to others; we all want houses to look attractive. But the

attractiveness of the paint is not what makes it do the job of paint which is to protect that which it covers. So, too, the pleasures of language and the creative use of language is not what makes it do the job of language which is to communicate ideas coherently and effictively.

We must remember, too, that language is learned sequentially and that sequences cannot be reversed or stages skipped.[12] Language skills instruction, then, must encompass the fundamentals of language acquisition--sequence and order.

Modeling communication and language instruction after the needs of business is an obligation of education, especially general education whose primary objective is that of equipping youth with the knowledge and the skills necessary to get and to hold existing jobs.[13] Modeling English instruction on the needs of the job market would permit identification of "common problems of employee training."[14] Education, like organized religion, is being forced to "commercialize the product,"[15] and, to commercialize the product, the curricula, to approximately the same degree and in about the same priority, must include the attitudes, accomplishments, and abilities which are revered by our students and their employers in the market place.

The results of the surveys which I have been associated with indicate that the wants and needs of our public are fairly clear and basic to any language arts instruction. If we are to train students and if we are to retain the support of the general public, we must acknowledge these identified wants and needs and adjust our instructional goals and objectives accordingly. That is not to say

that the wants and needs of the public are the only objectives in the teaching of English, but they must be the acknowledged and emphasized goals upon which any additional training must be based.

Who is our public? The future employees (our students) and their employers. What does the public want? Ask them in an objective manner; they will let you know. What does the public need? Again, ask them in an objective manner, and they will let you know.

APPENDIX I

Educational Levels of General Population (1970)

100%	Total Population
98%	Enter school
94%	Reach Grade 5
91%	Reach Grade 9
79%	Reach Grade 11
59%	Graduate from High School
25%	Enter Higher Education
7.6%	Enter Two-Year Colleges
3.5%	Graduate from Two-Year Colleges
17.5%	Enter Four-Year Colleges
4%	Graduate from Four-Year Colleges

--Based upon articles in American Education (July, 1973) and Our Education (June, 1973).

APPENDIX II

Employers' Laments

Related to written communication	Percentage of Responses
Careless or sloppy handwriting	6.3
Poor spelling	3.1
Incomplete sentences	1.5
Incomplete headings	1.5
Lack of organization in writing	4.7
Lack of neatness of material	3.1
Personal qualities	
Poor personal appearance	4.7
Lack of promptness and dependability	4.7
Lack of pride in doing the job well	9.5
Gum-chewing	4.7
Gossiping	3.1
Mumbling	4.7
Lack of courtesy	9.5
Lack of loyalty to employer or business	6.3
Lack of telephone courtesy	20.6
Use of slang	6.3
Other	
Inability to fill out application forms	1.5
Praise of clerical employees	1.5
Comments on other students	1.5

[1]The Chronicle of Higher Education, (March 1976), p.32.

[2]See Appendix I, p. 13.

[3]Kenneth B. Hoyt, "Vocational Aspects of School Guidance Programs," Modern Buidance in Business Education, XLIV (Sommerville: The Eastern Business Teachers Association, 1971), 33.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Edward B. Bower, "Office Employment Expectations of Business Students," The Delta Pi Epsilon Journal,(1971), 1.

[6]David Shaw, "Vocational Training with a Twist," Business Education Forum (January 1976), 29.

[7]"Real Test," Gazzette Times (Corvallis, OR), 2 October 1976, p. 4.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Jeane L. Dille, "Communication-Related Skills and Competencies Of Clerical Employees as Viewed by Business," Hornell, NY (unpublished), December, 1973.

[10]See Appendix II, p. 14.

[11]John F. Gummere, "Grammar is not Sociology," CBE Publications, (1972), 16.

[12]Margaret Early, "Important Research in Reading and Writing," New York Teacher Magazine, (1 February 1976), 17.

[13]Jerome I. Levanthal,"Summary and Implications for Secondary Education," Modern Guidance in Business Education, XLV (Sommerville: The Eastern Business Teachers Association, 1972), 213.

[14]Lean B. Prewitt, "Research inf Office Practice," The Office Practice Program in Business Education, XLVI (Sommerville: The Eastern Business Teachers Association, 1969), 33.

[15]Tom Lehrer, "Vatican Rag," That Was the Year That Was. (Recording),Reprise, RS:6179, n.d.